

BOOK REVIEWS

Musical Instruments of the Indigenous People of South Africa. Percival R. Kirby. 2013. (1st ed. OUP 1934, repr. 1953, 2nd ed. Witwatersrand University Press 1965), 3rd ed. Witwatersrand University Press (title updated from 'native races') 159 ills., map, xxxv, 400pp.

When a well-known reference book goes into a revised third edition 80 years after its first publication, it is a good sign that its content has not become obsolete in this ever-expanding world of knowledge, and that it has something to say. 'Kirby', as ethnomusicologists know it affectionately, will remain the standard with which to compare modern southern African instruments.

There is no question that the book is still needed, if it is only to help the muddled naming of most non-specialists; Kirby's wide and accurate observation and orthography give us something to use as a 'starting order' to an original state of affairs. There is nothing else like it. However 21st century readers should not think, "Here's a new version — it must be better than the old one!". What is "revised" here? Apart from its new and beautifully clear appearance it is no better or worse than the old one. The text is reset in a new type-face, the written music reset in 'Sibelius', the photographs, some from Kirby's negatives, spruced up. Best of all, it is encased in a flattering off-white hard cover with one of the photos on the outside. No need for a dust cover here — it would be a shame to shroud it! And it has a page-locating ribbon. But we still have the same unchanged information inside — it's the nearest we have to the baseline. Let's continue to make the most of it, critically but with pleasure.

A few words on the original material for anyone unfamiliar with 'Kirby' ... It is based on Kirby's and his students' happily wide, but essentially patchy coverage of the country, of all known types of instrument, identified by ethnic group, supported by a collection of instruments now admirably preserved at the S.A. College of Music, University of Cape Town, several music notations — some reproducible, some impressionistic — historical sources, parameters for definition of instrument types, narrative episodes, etc. The level of detail and depth varies; the observations made by his aware and scientific mind were made during particular, relatively brief exposures. The extended participation now expected by the science of ethnomusicology was still in the future.

Our knowledge, of course, has advanced in some areas. The publishers have made the choice not to attempt to incorporate subsequent research, as would have been possible for some instruments ... lamellophone, xylophone, pipe ensembles, bows. Of course it is a pity to have lost the chance to correct mistakes or misinterpretations. Is there anyone who is ready to undertake such a broad task? The index of the photographs, which are no longer bunched at the back but re-distributed through the text, is unfortunately not paginated, so one will still have the same old trouble in finding them.

But our retreat, our loss, in knowledge over eighty years is even greater than

any advance. The book may reveal to a first-time reader the wealth of traditional instruments in the early 20th century, but by default it also shows up the on-going impoverishment of the present-day instrumentarium. The wry question comes up every time I browse Kirby's breadth of description: by my estimate fewer than half the instruments described still exist and are played, particularly the smaller, personal ones are gone. If anything has taken their place at all it is Western instruments and the media. Today's musicians may console themselves, nevertheless, if they ever need to do so in the middle of their headlong creativity, that much South African music retains certain qualities which echo the sounds and preferences of their fathers, as they were discovered and expressed on these expired instruments. Root elements such as love of the harmonic series and alternation between two fundamentals for instance were first described and presented by Kirby in this and his other works.

The new Foreword by Michael Nixon, curator of the Kirby instrument collection at the University of Cape Town, is political in tone, focussing less on the content than on the assessment of the man and the tainted 'historical and intellectual discourses' current when he wrote. Do we need to be reminded that writing from *any* period must be seen in the light of contemporary knowledge and habits of thought? Just as the music of nearby African language groups is often in my experience the most disliked, so in 2014 we are still close enough to the 1930s to be afraid of what those political thought patterns led to within a few years. Nevertheless revisionism is tiresome; of course Kirby was a man of his time; what else could he possibly have been. Let us simply take the advice of the US Dragnet detective whose motto was "Just give me the facts, man...the facts!"; and accept the information packed into the book as valuable and still usable today. The revisionist approach to writers of the colonial period can easily vitiate their value in the mind of the reader. My father too, Hugh Tracey, whom one can reasonably call the "other" great South African musicologist, a little younger than Kirby, is regularly diminished for this reason by the politically correct.

Nixon suggests, and I agree, that the best way to read the book is in conjunction with the instruments themselves at the S.A. College of Music, though not everyone will be so lucky. I would just add: make and play your own, and discover both their essential simplicity and the emotional and technical artistry they are made for.

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A Language of Song: Journeys in the Musical World of the African Diaspora. Samuel Charters. 2009. London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 59 photos, index, 368pp.

Although the book is limiting in its selective approach to the trans-Atlantic diaspora of black Africans, it nonetheless holds a certain kind of appeal that future and present scholars of music will find hard to match or attain. The style of writing is superb, it